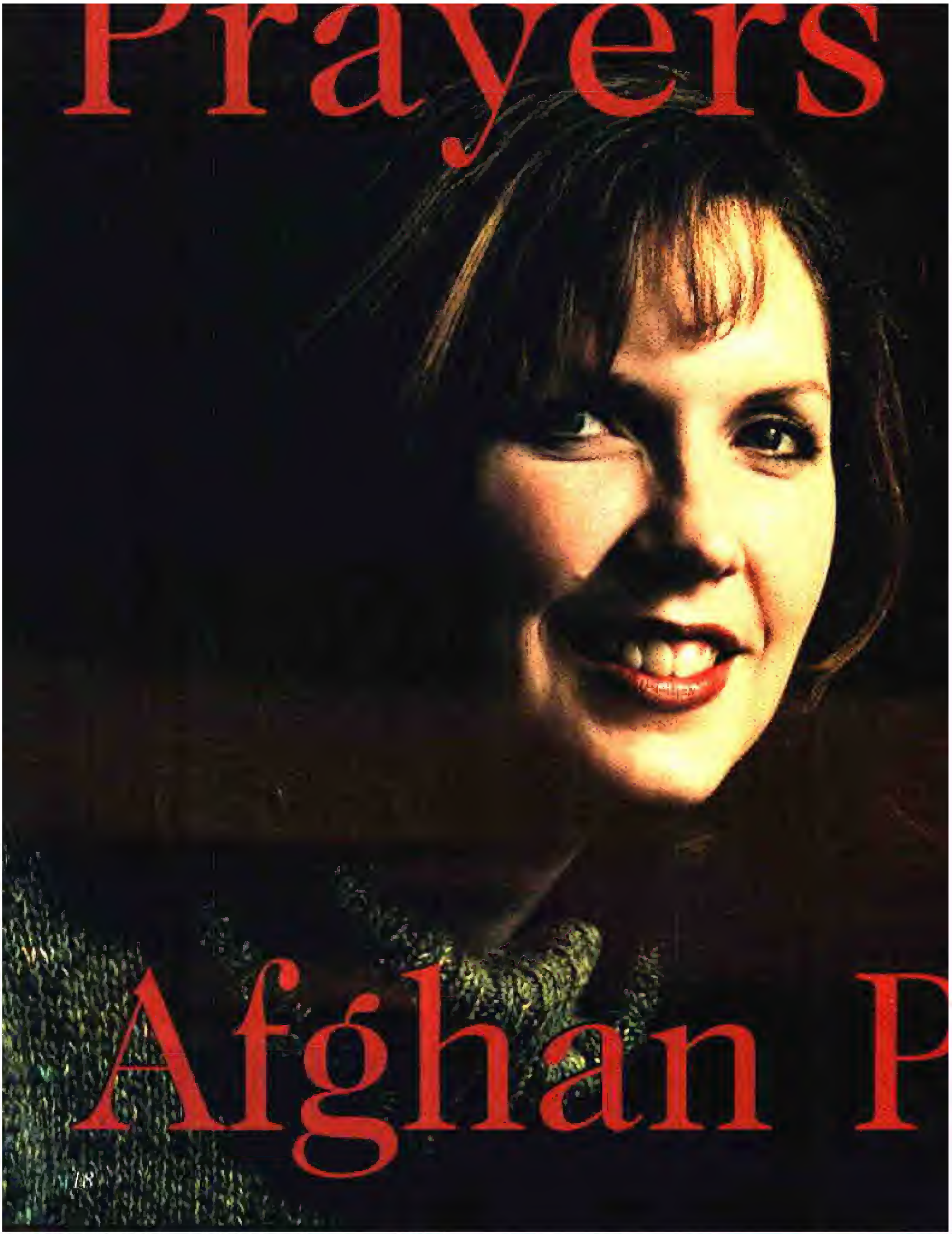
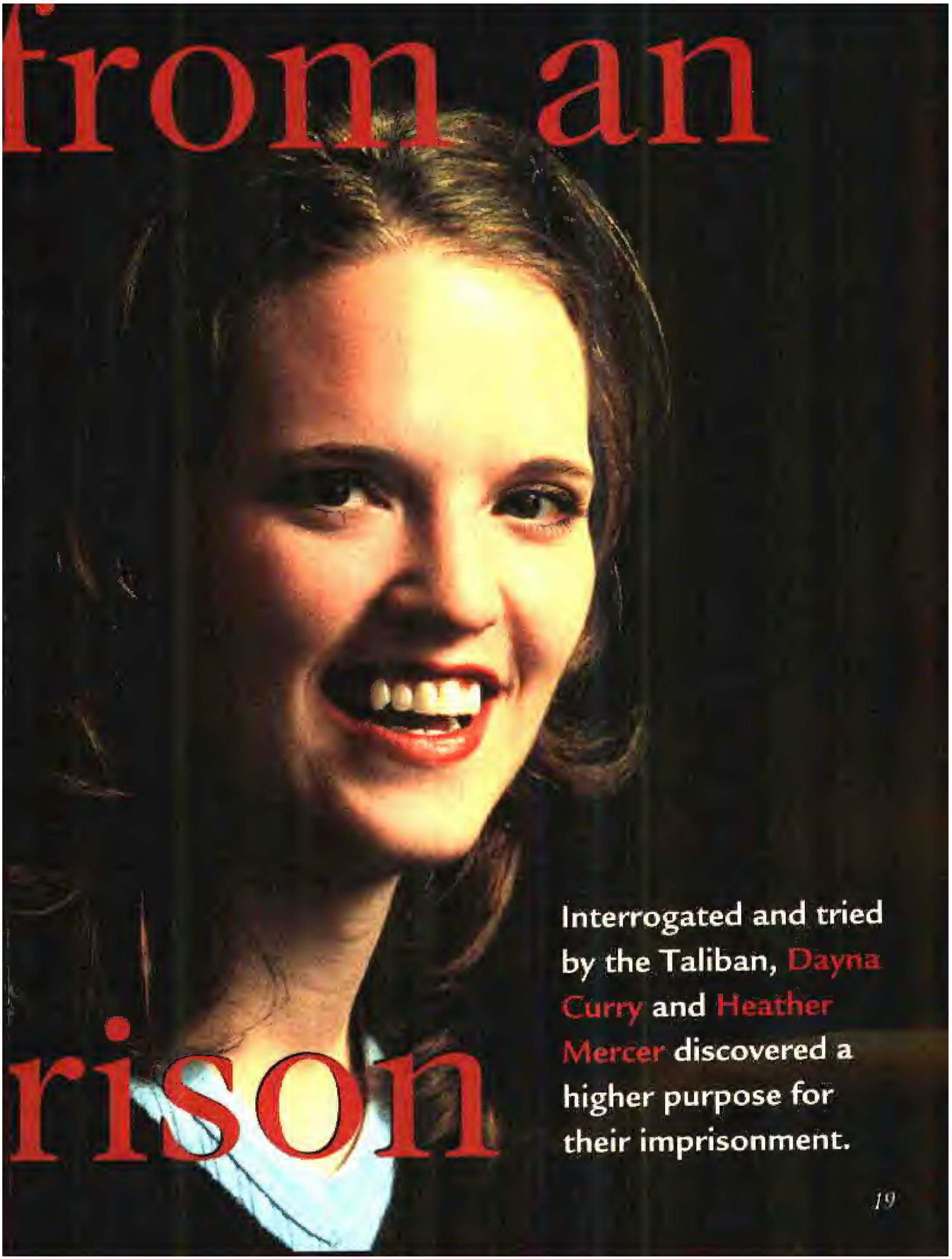


Prayers



Afghan P



from an

prison

Interrogated and tried
by the Taliban, **Dayna
Curry** and **Heather
Mercer** discovered a
higher purpose for
their imprisonment.

August 3, 2001, began like many other days in Kabul, Afghanistan, for Dayna Curry and Heather Mercer, who were serving as foreign aid workers in the poverty-stricken country. Part of a contingent of more than a dozen foreign aid workers for the Germany-based Shelter Now International (SNI), the two women went about their regular duties in the city—running language schools, working with street children, feeding widows, and helping women market home-based skills like sewing and embroidery. They also frequently shared tea and conversation with Afghans, even though doing so inside an Afghan home—or inside their own homes—was against the laws of the Taliban, the government of hardline Muslims who had ruled the country since 1996.

“We just see ourselves as simple people who wanted to go and love the poor and try to help a desperate nation in a small way,” said Mercer after her return to the United States from Afghanistan. As most of the world now knows, Mercer, Curry, and six other SNI aid workers were imprisoned for 105 days and put on trial for preaching Christianity to native Muslims.

On the night of Friday, August 3,

when the SNI aid worker contingent in Kabul gathered for its weekly meeting to pray for Afghanistan, it quickly became clear that something was wrong.

“Heather and Dayna were later than normal, so we began looking for them,” recalls Frederick (not his real name), who was a member of their SNI team.

At 10:30, the Taliban religious police confirmed that they had detained Curry and Mercer, but they claimed it was too close to the 11 P.M. curfew to discuss the matter any further.

Though the workers were accustomed to threats and hostile edicts from the Taliban, this was the first time an SNI worker had been arrested, says Frederick. “The Taliban aren’t homogenous,” he says. “Some are more moderate and reasonable; so we were going to those kind of Taliban in different government ministries to see if they could mediate for us.”

By Sunday, things had gone further awry. The Taliban stormed the home of two German women from the SNI team that day and took them right out of their bedroom. Three more workers were taken at the Shelter Now offices. “We could hear them on the radio saying, ‘The Taliban are here.’ And then they were cut off, and we heard Taliban speaking on the radio. We sent someone to check, and they were taken too,” Frederick says.

Something was wrong, but it wasn’t clear how wrong until Georg Taubmann

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disappeared. Taubmann, the founder of SNI-Germany and director of the group's Kabul operation, had driven to the home of the two German women to tell them of the next crisis meeting. But the home was crawling with Taliban, who yanked Taubmann out of his vehicle and arrested him on the spot.

Left behind

Frederick, his wife, and the other aid workers began discussing a plan for evacuation. They hesitated to leave their colleagues in jail, but with eight children among those who were still free, it

became obvious that evacuation was the only reasonable option.

The SNI workers and their children left the city on Monday morning at 4:30—one hour before dawn, the time designated for the first Muslim prayers of the day—when the nightly curfew lifted. At 6:30, the Taliban police were at their homes.

When the SNI party reached the Pakistani border, the guards were eating lunch. Bothered by the interruption, they hastily stamped the passports and waved the workers through the border crossing rather than completing the



Sweet Reunion: Heather (center) is embraced by her father, John Mercer, after landing in Islamabad, Pakistan, following her and Dayna's rescue from Afghanistan.

required paperwork that would have revealed the travelers' identities. The radio station in Kabul announced that the workers had "disappeared."

Meanwhile, Curry, Mercer, and the six other workers who had truly "disappeared" were subjected to 22 hours of grueling interrogation by Taliban religious police and began the three-and-a-half month imprisonment that would become an international incident.

Even now, Curry and Mercer are not sure exactly why they were arrested. Talking to Afghan people about matters of faith, they say, was a normal and daily activity. "In most Islamic cultures issues of faith are a top priority, and to discuss faith and religion in an Islamic culture is a very natural thing," says Mercer. "They would share about Allah and how he was their one God, and often they would ask questions about our own faith. And that's exactly how we found ourselves in this situation, just through relationship with an Afghan family. We didn't feel like we were doing anything wrong. We still stand by that."

Curry says 80 percent of the charges alleged by the Taliban were false. It was true, she admits, that they had been in an Afghan home and that they had shown a DVD of the *Jesus* film to the family on a laptop computer. Jesus, after all, is one of the holy prophets of Islam, Curry says.

What was not true, both Curry and Mercer insist, was the charge of proselytizing. The Taliban defined "proselytizing" as seeking conversions in exchange for humanitarian aid. "We're completely 100 percent innocent of that," Curry contends.

Foundations of faith

Curry and Mercer are unlikely characters in a prison adventure story. They exhibit qualities of the stereotypical "girl next door." Even members of the national press had a difficult time not calling them "girls," though Curry turned 30 while imprisoned and Mercer is now 25.

Deliverance: Heather (left) and Dayna celebrated their freedom at a citywide worship gathering in Waco, Texas.



"It was prayer"

Their friends describe them as "real." Indeed, both women insisted on getting their hair done before meeting the press after being freed from the Taliban. But underneath their "ordinary girl" exterior lies an uncommon faith that sustained these women through an incredible ordeal. "It was prayer that kept us strong

and kept our hope alive," Curry says.

The two women had much in common before they even met. Both come from divorced homes, and both say they first realized their desire to go into mission work while they were students at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

Mercer grew up in a suburb of



that kept our hope alive." —Dayna Curry

Washington, D.C., and came to Baylor looking for a “Christian school.” Curry, who grew up in Nashville, says her mother chose Baylor because she thought it would be a good influence on her daughter. “I had a really rough high-school

composed. Curry says that some of the Taliban called them sisters, said they loved them, and claimed they would risk their lives to protect the prisoners. The SNI workers returned the respect, always honoring their captors’ requests that

**“Women were being beaten until they bled.
There was a presence of evil in that place.”**

—Heather Mercer

thing, and my personal life was a mess,” Curry says. “I just wanted to start over out of the state and have a new life.”

It was during a chapel program featuring a drama about international missions that Curry first thought, *Maybe God wants me to get involved with helping people overseas.*

While a sophomore, Mercer joined Highland Baptist Church, a large congregation that drew many Baylor students. “That was where I really started to get an understanding of what was going on around the world,” she says.

Curry had also been a student member of Highland Baptist, and both women joined Antioch Community Church when it was founded in June 1999—mostly by Baylor graduates—with a focus on world missions.

In enemy hands

Curry and Mercer have insisted they were well treated by their captors. They were always well fed, and the Taliban allowed them to pray in prison and even to sing the Christian songs that they

they be quiet during Islamic prayer times.

One of the greatest hardships of prison, say Curry and Mercer, was witnessing the treatment of Afghan prisoners. Several Afghan women were beaten with a hose after a seemingly innocent conversation with Mercer.

“Women were being beaten until they bled,” says Mercer. She also recounted hearing a man being whipped while 30 Taliban looked on and laughed. “There was the recognizable presence of evil in that place.”

Both Curry and Mercer say their time in prison was worthwhile because of the prayers generated for the country of Afghanistan and because of the growth in faith they both experienced. Curry believes God wanted prayers to be going up from *inside* Afghanistan, and that the aid workers filled that role. “Since we were in prison and we didn’t have much else to do, we prayed a lot,” she says.

Mercer speaks candidly about her struggle with fear during the first six weeks of imprisonment. “As the days

went on and the interrogations started, I became extremely afraid," she says. "For a month and a half, I feared that the religious police were going to execute us; I feared that we'd spend our whole lives in prison; I feared that a terrorist group would know where we were and kill us; and, eventually, I feared that we would lose our lives from a bomb. I was immobilized at times—physically just shaking with fear."

Finally, Mercer says, she came to a turning point. "I remembered the Scripture that said, 'If you lose your life, you'll find it. But if you save your life, you'll lose it' (Matt. 16:25). I was so afraid to die that I was just trying to save my own life. And I'd lost it. I didn't have joy. I didn't have control. When I finally said, 'If I die, I die for Jesus. And if I live, I live for him,' there was freedom."

"Before I went into Afghanistan, I knew that I could get put into prison," Mercer adds. "And I knew we could be killed for who we are as Christians and for different opportunities to proclaim what Jesus said. But I didn't realize until I stood in that prison and had to think that we'd all be dead how I had been standing on such shaky ground."

Though the prisoners saw family members four times during late August and early September, their parents were evacuated from Kabul after the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. The attacks came just as the trial for the eight workers was getting underway. Despite 9/11, the trial continued—in the stop-and-start manner of Taliban-style justice.

The most difficult times, the former

detainees say, were the long periods of waiting with no contact from the outside world. After their arrests, it was more than three weeks before Curry and Mercer saw Western diplomats. And after September 11, several weeks passed before the lawyer they'd chosen could get into the country from Pakistan. Another significant gap occurred after the U.S. began bombing Taliban strongholds on October 7.

Waiting and watching

The long periods of waiting were also the most difficult times for those at home. Immediately after the arrests of the workers, Antioch Community Church began a 24-hour prayer vigil, with a special room dedicated to praying for the detainees.

But it wasn't until the end of August that the identities of the detainees became public and the church acknowledged that the two Americans were from their congregation. A statement released on August 31 noted the many questions that had been asked about Curry and Mercer's work in Afghanistan.

Antioch pastor Jimmy Seibert explained that, "Dayna and Heather, as well as other workers at Shelter Now, desire to display the love of God in practical ways by caring for those in need. Their personal lives exude and communicate what they believe about God, and they live out their love for God through practical service."

On September 18, Seibert held the first press conference at Antioch Community Church. After the September 11 attacks, he feared the

plight of the aid workers would be forgotten in the midst of rallying for retaliation against the terrorists being harbored by the Taliban. "While we pray for victims' families and our national leaders, let's not forget Dayna and Heather, as well as the diplomats and families who are working in Central Asia to secure freedom for them," he said.

Initially, Seibert and his church felt it was best to stay in the background and let the State Department do its work. But soon the church decided that more

public attention needed to be given to the situation. "We need a miracle," Seibert explained. "We need hundreds of thousands of people to pray, and we hope it will be just enough to tip the scales of heaven and give them a way out."

As world events after September 11 began to escalate, the church reached out to the media even more, and friends of Curry and Mercer shared stories about them with the press. Though they were careful not to talk about the trial or say anything that would offend Afghan authorities, they also wouldn't deny that Curry and Mercer talked about Jesus in Afghanistan. "Look, they love Jesus," Seibert said last September. "And in the course of their lives, they share their love for him with others. They are not ashamed of the gospel."

From time to time, the Taliban would allow their prisoners to correspond with family and friends. Those special letters from Kabul were heartening to Dayna and Heather's faithful band of prayer warriors back home.

Mercer wrote from prison that, "I hope that in light of all the world's changing events, your lives are carrying on with some level of normalcy. I have seen more clearly in my time here what an exciting hour this world is in, but equally what a dangerous hour."

Curry wrote, "It's good to hear that so many people are praying. I hope they are praying for this country along with us. We believe that is one of the main reasons we are here—to motivate and awaken people to pray for this nation."

Though the letters were encouraging, there were long silences in between. And



Presidential Welcome: "It is a wonderful story about prayer, about the faith that can sustain people in good times and bad," said President Bush last November about Dayna and Heather's ordeal.

after American military forces began bombing Kabul relentlessly, concern for the detainees' well being increased by the minute.

Then on November 13 came the news that Afghanistan's anti-Taliban Northern Alliance forces had taken Kabul and that the Taliban had fled the city. It seemed like good news at first. But soon reports came that the Taliban took all the aid workers with them on their retreat.

Back home, everyone was relieved to know that Dayna and Heather were still alive. Nevertheless, many wondered what the Taliban, now clearly in a desperate state, would do next.

Then, 36 hours later, the SNI workers were free.

Hollywood ending

Those 36 hours were the stuff of Hollywood movies, Mercer says. Through a transistor radio one of the aid workers had, the prisoners learned that Kabul was on the verge of falling to the Northern Alliance.

Just as their hope was growing, Taliban soldiers pounded on the door. But these were not the same Taliban guards who had called them sisters. At first the women refused to open the door, but SNI director Georg Taubmann spoke to them from outside, saying, "They have Kalashnikovs [Russian-style assault rifles], and they're angry. Open the door." So the women grabbed a few blankets and stuffed the folds of their clothes with valuables—letters, their Bibles, and necklaces made by Afghan women prisoners.

The eight aid workers were loaded

into a van, where they sat on top of rocket launchers. "It was probably the first time I really felt we were in danger," recalls Curry. For three bumpy hours, the workers sang songs and read Scripture until the Taliban stopped in the middle of a field, where the workers were put into a metal shipping container to wait out the night. Mercer planted herself in the doorway and refused to budge so that the guards could not close and lock the door.

In the morning, they were taken to a prison in Ghazni, a town about 80 miles from Kabul. There a battle erupted. American bombs were falling, and the workers knew that the U.S. military did not know they were there.

After a while, they looked out the window and saw the Taliban running. Following 30 minutes of eerie silence, says Mercer, "All of a sudden, an opposition soldier comes in with reams of ammunition around his neck, and he just starts screaming, 'You're free! You're free! The city is free! The Taliban has left!'"

The Afghan people they had gone to serve had set them free. But freedom, the SNI workers soon realized, did not necessarily mean safety.

A commander of the mujahadeen [Afghan resistance fighters] sheltered the eight workers in his home that day, while representatives of the International Red Cross informed the United States of the aid workers' whereabouts.

In the middle of the night, the SNI workers went to a deserted field and waited for U.S. military helicopters. The wait was longer than expected—several hours, in fact. Meanwhile, the situation

in the city was shaky; the workers didn't want the wrong people to know where they were, but the helicopters couldn't find them with just the light of a dim lantern to go by.

hopes to produce a CD of the worship songs they composed while in prison. Most of those songs are based on Bible verses that were meaningful to them.

Fame, they admit, is hard to handle.

"When I finally said, 'If I die, I die for Jesus,' there was freedom."

—Heather Mercer

It was Mercer who decided to set her headscarf on fire. The Afghan soldiers waiting with them gathered wood and added to the blaze. And that was how the helicopters found them in the early hours of November 15.

In the spotlight

Now that they're home, Curry and Mercer find it hard to avoid the spotlight. During their first week back, Larry King, Katie Couric, and *People* magazine all called for interviews. And today, people in airports regularly ask them for autographs. The women are realistic about the demands of their newfound celebrity. In fact, they hired an agent to handle the multitudes of appearance requests they've received—from children's Sunday-school classes to Oprah Winfrey.

In June, Doubleday released *Prisoners of Hope*, a book recounting Curry and Mercer's dramatic story. Most of the proceeds will go to Afghanistan relief efforts, the women say. The pair also

"We're excited about it for the sake of what can happen for Afghanistan," says Curry, "but I probably would never choose this lifestyle. There's the pull when you live in the spotlight to want all the fame, to want all the glory, to want all the money and all the other things fame has to offer. You have to really go against the grain. I think in some ways that's harder than living in Afghanistan, where life is simple."

That may partly be why the women often talk of someday returning to the country where they were imprisoned. In the meantime, however, they are seeking to use their celebrity clout to bring attention to both the physical and spiritual needs of the Afghan people.

"This is not about us," Mercer told reporters upon her return to the U.S. "This is about Jesus, the miracles he can do, and the way he answers prayer." She also said, "Even if we had died in prison, even if the Taliban had killed us, God would still be good. God would still be who he says he is." **CR**